

Message Text

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ACTION INR-07

INFO OCT-01 ARA-06 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 NSAE-00 PA-01

USIA-06 PRS-01 SP-02 /024 W

-----150229Z 044880 /72-61

R 141637Z JAN 77

FM AMEMBASSY TEGUCIGALPA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 5466

INFO AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

AMEMBASSY MANAGUA

AMEMBASSY SAN JOSE

AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR

USCINCSO QUARRY HTS CZ

C O N F I D E N T I A L TEGUCIGALPA 0220

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, MORG, PGOV, HO

SUBJECT: ANALYSIS OF MILITARY CHANGES

REF: (A) TEGUCIGALPA 0113, (B) IR 6841000277, (C) TEGUCIGALPA 0025

BEGIN SUMMARY. THE RECENT MILITARY CHANGES WERE OCCASIONED BY THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE MILITARY SYSTEM RATHER THAN AS A REACTION TO A RUMORED COUP ATTEMPT. CHIEF OF STATE MELGAR IS IN A STRONGER POSITION THAN HE WAS A YEAR AGO VIS-A-VIS THE SUPERIOR DEFENSE COUNCIL (SDC), BUT THE SDC STILL IS THE SUPREME BODY OF AUTHORITY IN THE COUNTRY. THE MISSION BELIEVES THAT THERE WILL BE NO SIGNIFICANT CHANGE OF DIRECTION IN GOVERNMENT PLANS IN THE COMING YEAR AND THAT THE PRESENT MODERATE LEADERSHIP WILL REMAIN IN CONTROL. END SUMMARY.

1. AS REPORTED REFTELS A AND B, A NUMBER OF MILITARY PERSONNEL CHANGES TOOK PLACE ON JANUARY 5. AS COULD BE EXPECTED, A SERIES OF RUMORS IMMEDIATELY CIRCULATED THAT ASCRIBED THE CHANGES TO THE THWARTING OF AN IMMINENT MILITARY PLOT AGAINST THE REGIME. THE MISSION'S OPINION IS THAT THE CHANGES WERE BROUGHT ABOUT
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BY THE INTERNAL DYNAMICS OF THE HONDURAN MILITARY ESTABLISHMENT RATHER THAN AS A REACTION TO A COUP PLOT. IN OUR VIEW, THE DECEMBER PROMOTIONS FOLLOW THE TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AND RULES OF THE MILITARY, E.G., THE ORGANIC LAW OF THE ARMED FORCES, RATHER THAN AS A REACTION TO COUP PLANS. THE CHANGES IN COMMAND ON JANUARY 5 REFLECT THE WEEDING OUT OF SEVERAL OFFICERS WHO WERE EITHER TOO "HOT HEADED" OR OVERLY

AMBITIOUS FOR THE MODERATE MAJORITY OF THE SDC. IN THAT REGARD, THE MILITARY CHANGES REFLECT THOSE CHANGES THAT HAVE TAKEN PLACE BEFORE
IN THAT THOSE OFFICERS WHO WERE "IRRITANTS" TO THE MODERATE MAJORITY HAVE BEEN ASSIGNED TO POSITIONS OUTSIDE THE COUNTRY OR TO STAFF FUNCTIONS.

2. CHIEF OF STATE MELGAR APPEARS TO HAVE STRENGTHENED HIS POSITION, AS COMPARED TO A YEAR AGO VIS-A-VIS THE SDC. THE SDC IS STILL THE SUPREME AUTHORITY AND SETS OVERALL POLICY GUIDELINES; HOWEVER, IT HAS GIVEN MELGAR INCREASING LATITUDE OF ACTION IN IMPLEMENTING AGREED-UPON PLANS AND PROGRAMS. VARIOUS OFFICERS IN THE SDC HAVE ATTEMPTED FROM TIME TO TIME TO DEVELOP A PREDOMINANT POSITION OF POWER WITHIN THE SDC, BUT NO ONE OFFICER OR GROUP OF OFFICERS HAS SUCCEEDED IN DOING SO. THE RESULT HAS BEEN TO STRENGTHEN MELGAR AND TO PERMIT MATTERS SUCH AS PROMOTIONS TO BE DECIDED ON THE BASIS OF EXISTING RULES.

3. COLONEL CESAR ELVIR SIERRA IS NO LONGER CHIEF OF STAFF AND WILL BE FREE TO DEVOTE HIS FULL ATTENTION TO THE FUNCTIONING OF THE NATIONAL ADVISORY COUNCIL. THE MELGAR REGIME HAS PLACED GREAT EMPHASIS ON THE ADVISORY COUNCIL AS A BODY TO SET UP THE ELECTORAL LAW THAT WILL GOVERN FUTURE ELECTIONS; THE CHIEF OF STATE HAS CALLED FOR THE HOLDING OF FREE ELECTIONS, PROBABLY IN 1979. ELVIR'S POSITION AS PRESIDENT OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL IS IMPORTANT FROM A SYMBOLIC VIEWPOINT IN THAT HE WILL BE THE MILITARY OFFICER MOST CONCERNED WITH A RETURN TO CONSTITUTIONAL GOVERNMENT; IN THAT REGARD, HE MAY ASSUME AN CONFIDENTIAL

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INCREASINGLY POLITICAL ROLE AS THE ELECTIONS APPROACH. HE WILL ALSO CONTINUE TO BE ONE OF THE MAIN NEGOTIATORS IN THE DISPUTE WITH EL SALVADOR. NONETHELESS, HE HAS LOST HIS MILITARY POWER BASE. THERE HAS BEEN CRITICISM IN THE MILITARY THAT HE COULD NOT DEVOTE ENOUGH TIME TO THIS DUTIES AS CHIEF OF STAFF AND HOLD THE POSITION OF PRESIDENT OF THE ADVISORY COUNCIL AT THE SAME TIME. IT APPEARS TO THE MISSION THAT ELVIR IS THE

BEST MAN FOR THE POSITION BECAUSE OF HIS INTELLIGENCE AND HIGH LEVEL OF COMPETENCE. HE IS ALSO PRO-U.S.

4. BRIG. GENERAL MARIO CHINCHILLA CARCAMO MOVED FROM THE POSITION OF MINISTER OF DEFENSE TO THE POSITION OF CHIEF OF STAFF. CHINCHILLA WAS REPLACED BY COL. OMAR ANTONIO ZELAYA REYES (SEE REFTEL A). THE POSITION OF MINISTER OF DEFENSE IS MAINLY ADMINISTRATIVE IN NATURE AND DOES NOT INVOLVE THE COMMAND OF TROOPS. IT IS OUR VIEW THAT CHINCHILLA WILL EXERCISE CONSIDERABLY MORE AUTHORITY IN HIS ROLE AS

CHIEF OF STAFF THAN HE DID AS MINISTER OF DEFENSE AND WILL
DEVOTE FULL TIME TO HIS MILITARY DUTIES.

5. THE MISSION BELIEVES THAT THE COMMITMENTS OF THE REGIME TO
THE NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN, PULP AND PAPER PROJECT, THE
TORNASAL TOURIST COMPLEX, THE EL CAJON ELECTRIC PROJECT AND
AGRARIAN REFORM WILL CONTINUE TO DEVELOP AS PLANNED DURING
THE COMING YEAR. WE HAVE NO REASON TO BELIEVE THAT THERE WILL
BE ANY SIGNIFICANT CHANGE IN THE GOVERNMENT'S DIRECTION
EITHER DOMESTICALLY OR IN ITS INTERNATIONAL STANCE. WE
BELIEVE THAT THE PRESENT MODERATE MILITARY LEADERSHIP WILL
REMAIN IN POWER AND WE EXPECT IT TO CONTINUE WITH PLANS TO
HOLD ELECTIONS IN 1979. FINALLY, THE MISSION IS CONVINCED THAT
THE PRESENT GOVERNMENT IS ANXIOUS TO CONCLUDE A PEACE
AGREEMENT WITH EL SALVADOR AS SOON AS THE MEDIATION PROCESS IS
COMPLETED.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01-Jan-1994 12:00:00 am
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: POLITICAL MILITARY RELATIONS, INTELLIGENCE ASSESSMENTS, PERSONNEL MOVEMENTS
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Sent Date: 14-Jan-1977 12:00:00 am
Decaption Date: 01-Jan-1960 12:00:00 am
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 22 May 2009
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1977TEGUCI00220
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: GS
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D770015-0707
Format: TEL
From: TEGUCIGALPA
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1977/newtext/t19770149/aaaabqww.tel
Line Count: 139
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 472571d9-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION INR
Original Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 3
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: CONFIDENTIAL
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 77 TEGUCIGALPA 113, 77 TEGUCIGALPA 25
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 25-Jan-2005 12:00:00 am
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: n/a
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 3590142
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: ANALYSIS OF MILITARY CHANGES
TAGS: PINT, MORG, PGOV, HO
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odb://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/472571d9-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Margaret P. Grafeld
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
22 May 2009
Markings: Margaret P. Grafeld Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 22 May 2009